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# **Motherhood in the Home or Achievement in Career Field**

**Yongjiao Hu**

## **ABSTRACT**

As society has developed, women's social levels have improved compared to the past. In the past, if women got married and had kids, they often took domestic positions, taking care of the family. Nowadays, women have more freedom to decide about whether to stay at home or work outside. However, external factors can also affect women's decisions. Some examples are social policy, family structure, financial situation, and education level. All of these contribute to the final decision about whether to stay at home or work outside the home. This literature review focuses on how and why those factors affect women's decisions and investigates the issues affecting women's mobility.

## Introduction

Relative to the past, women's rights have tended to expand in different social institutions. Sociologist Shamus Khan makes the argument that women's advancement has increased in 20<sup>th</sup> century America (2011). Similarly, Andrew J. Cherlin suggests that from the beginning of the women's revolution to the current era, the rights of women have improved compared to past periods. He shows that family structure has changed due to improvements in women's rights from the traditional-breadwinner structure family pattern to the modern family pattern structure of independence and interdependence families. The traditional family structure required women to sacrifice themselves to their family. Traditional beliefs suggested that women should stay at home, complete household work, rear children, and take care of their husband. Moreover, traditional views emphasized that women cannot have their own social life but should look after their family (Cherlin 2013). Alternatively, the independence family structure and the interdependence family structure emphasize individual self-development and intimacy, and mutual self-development, intimacy, and support respectively.

Women have more choices about their roles now. In the past, during the traditional-breadwinner structure in the 19<sup>th</sup>, women who were middle- or upper- class did not have as many options. Traditional views emphasized that women should stay at home rearing children and doing the household work. Mothers that come from poor families had no choice but to work because their families need money to maintain livelihood. Nowadays, since the stage of independence and interdependence family structure's introduction in 1970s, some women from middle- and upper- class have begun to have individual choice about what they want in their personal lives. They can choose to stay at home to take care of their families. They can also leave their child in the care of others and pursue their own career goals. It seems like the mother's career pattern all depend on their personal ideas instead of other factors. Are these truly only related to the mother's individual decision? A mother's decision about timing of return to work is complex. Even if women can make their own options about what to do, they still could be affected by so many elements, like social policy, financial situation, and education level. This literature review focuses on those elements in order to understand the social context underlying mothers' choices.

### **Mothers Who Stay at Home**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were some theorists who held the belief that mothers and infants needed a significant bond to develop a mother-infant relationship in the first year of birth to establish a good relationship. Partly because of this, more and more mothers decided to stay at home at least one year after the infant's birth. Some researchers say that "women without children tend to 'idealize' the motherhood state and 'overexpress' the intention to drop out of the work force while their children are young" (Hock, Christamn and Hock 1980). Even if the belief persists that mothers should stay at home to look after infants, not every individual mother will choose to do so. Some mothers still work outside the home shortly after giving birth, sometimes because of the outside social pressures.

### **Mothers Who Work Outside**

Even if our world has become much more democratic than before, there are still challenges and limitations for new mothers, particularly when it comes to decisions about work and motherhood (Hock, Christman and Hock, 1980:325). Hock and colleagues looked into the period from birth of an infant through the first year of child's life, and found that maternal behavior could be divided into two categories: mothers who planned to stay home with their infants and later did, contrasted with mothers who changed their plans and worked outside eventually. Their study contained 82 mother participants in total; 62 of them stayed at home, and 20 of them planned to stay home but eventually went back to the labor market.

The findings show that the first group of mothers makes up a large percentage of the sample. Although almost all the mothers state that they want to stay with their baby for at least one year to strengthen the motherhood, findings show that not everyone can retain their original plans when they face the realities of life, including social policy, the financial situation of their family, family structure and education level.

### **Social Policy and Family Structure**

Welfare policies could also affect a mother's choice about her career. For example, "in the United States - where a *universal--breadwinner strategy* is promoted - 75 percent of all women are back at work only six months after the birth of a first child. In Sweden - the country with an *earner-career strategy* - 75 percent are back after five years and in Germany-with its *caregiver-parity strategy* - less than 75 percent are back even after eight

years” (Aisenbrey, Evertsson, and Grunow 2009: 597). For these three countries, almost 75% women go back to work eventually, but the amount of time that it takes them to return to work varies. The different policies in these three countries may lead mothers to make varying decisions about staying at home, which shows that welfare policy plays a significant role in women’s career and motherhood choices.

Welfare can also shape family structure. According to Aisenbrey, Evertsson and Grunow, many refer to West Germany as a *male-breadwinner/female-homemaker* state, which favors motherly caregiving in the home over career achievement outside of it (1999). Additionally, some policies encourage the traditional family structure. The traditional family usually involves the husband working outside the home and the wife staying home to take care for the children. Hence, women in families from West Germany may not think about whether they need to work or not because policy encourages the male breadwinner to be the primary source of income. Many women believe what they need to do for their family is to take care of the children and do the household work. This may be the reason why West Germany has a lower proportion of women choosing to work compared to Sweden and the United States (Aisenbrey, Evertsson, and Grunow 2009:597).

Policies in Sweden and the United States do not encourage traditional family structure compared to West Germany. Both of them prefer the equal division of labor in families which is based on the independence and interdependence family structure. Comparing their policies, Misra, Budig and Moller (2007) refer to Sweden’s structure as an earner-career regime, which is considered more open to women’s choices. It provides parents with generous parental leave insurance and high quality, subsidized public childcare, so that mothers get enough time spend on their kids without worries about losing their employment position (Aisenbrey, Evertsson, and Grunow 2009).

The United States policy is sometimes called the “*universal breadwinner state*”, which results in low family leave coverage (Aisenbrey, Evertsson, and Grunow 2009). For example, there is low work security for mothers, therefore it is difficult for mothers to simultaneously take care of kids and keep their jobs. The social policy in the United States encourages mothers have to leave home for a job as soon as possible. It is clear that Sweden’s policy allows mothers to contribute for longer lengths of time to take care of their children.

All in all, the country's welfare policy affects a mother's choice about career. Policy shapes people's thinking about family structure, which also influence mothers' decisions about work. For West Germany, the policy encourages the traditional family structure. Mothers do not need to focus on a career. In the United States and Sweden, mothers need to be more concerned about work due to policies created around very different family structures. Swedish mothers do not need to leave home as early as mothers from the United States because of the friendly welfare policy that their country provides.

### **Financial Situation**

From the macro-sociological view, welfare policy has a significant effect on the decisions of mothers. At the same time, there also exist some other elements which force mothers go back to the labor market much earlier than they expected. As far as the effect of maternal instincts is concerned, many mothers may prefer to stay at home, this has been discussed in previous section of this review. However, mothers might face some challenges in making these choices. Baxter (2008) showed analyses from the 2005 *Parental Leave in Australia Survey (PLAS)* that 45% mothers who returned with 15 months after delivering child stated that they returned earlier for financial reasons (2008).

When mothers contribute the main income of the whole family, they may choose to go back to career field sooner. When father's earning is relatively high, women may be less likely to return to work for financial reasons (Baxter 2008). For these mothers whose income does not occupy a large composition of the whole family income, they will compare the benefit between staying at home and returning to work. Then they will choose the option that gives the family the maximum benefit.

Financial considerations are very important. People need food, clothing, and other daily support, all of them related to money. After a new baby is born, couples will face increasing life pressures. Therefore, mothers would choose to work outside as soon as they can if their husband does not have enough ability to support the whole family. No matter whether the idea of working outside comes from their own true aspiration or not, they have to accept the reality in society that families require financial stability.

### **Education level**

Higher education has also become more open to accepting people of different races and

genders (Khan 2011:5), and an increased number of women have a chance to receive a higher education degree. After they get higher academic qualification, they can get the “higher-status managerial, professional and associate-professional jobs” like men have always had available (Baxter 2008).

Aisenbrey, Evertsson and Grunow (2009) highlight a trend that higher educated women take shorter leaves compared to lower-educated woman. Based on the database from NSHD (the National Survey of Health Development), 65% mothers with degrees return to paid work one year after their first birth, compared with 28% unqualified mothers (Gatrell 2005). These highly educated women usually have already got a satisfying job before they got married or had children. They return to work soon after the birth of infants, for worrying about how their jobs may be affected by the long break (Baxter 2008).

Some women also value jobs because of the opportunity to get out of the house (Duncan and Edwards 1999, Lupton and Schmied 2002, Duncan *et al.* 2003, Hand and Hughes 2004). Hand and Hughes showed that the desire about going back to work occurs because employment can bring them individual satisfaction or fulfillment, increase social interaction (Fagan 2001, Hand and Hughes 2004). In the meantime, some women feel that if they do not work outside, they would lack the adult interaction or conversations.

To summarize, women who have a post-secondary degree would be more likely to return to work for the purpose of maintaining skills and qualifications compared to those without high education degree (Baxter 2008). They may be concerned about losing their job or losing the chance of getting promoted within their career track. Additionally, they also do not want to become isolated in their own home.

## Conclusion

The articles discussed earlier all show that decisions about returning to work are complex; choices are determined by both internal motivations and external forces. As discussed in earlier sections, social forces, family structure, and financial situations are all external forces which come from society. Mothers have to adjust themselves to maintain basic living. For instance, if a mother chooses to stay at home she might find that her working position will be taken over by others, or she will experience downward mobility in her career track. At this point, even if mothers can make their own decisions about what to do, there are still lots of

external effects that they need to consider before they make their decision.

Looking at different countries, women will grow up in different cultural backgrounds which will shape their ideas about motherhood. Mothers who hold a high education degree have their individual view of being a mother and successful career-focused woman. They may balance the employment advantage, strength the relationship between children and mother with the disadvantage of job loss or downward shift of a working position before they make the decision.

Yet, every country has their own welfare policies about parental living issues, which present unique choices. The article by Aisenbrey, Evertsson and Grunow shows that the policy in the United States does not treat women differently from men. Women have little policy protection. Some people hold the opinion that mothers can, or should choose to stay home. However, if mothers choose to stay at home until their kids get older, they would lose the social interaction that they may have received if they chose to work outside the home. Considering the family financial situation, if their husband loses their job suddenly, they must return to work as soon as possible because they have babies to financially support. If the wife is the only income source, choices are even more limited.



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